

Parental leave essential to attracting young people to municipal politics, councillors say ^[1]

Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities plans to discuss maternity leave in the future

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EXCERPTS

Two women in the Annapolis Valley think it's time for a maternity leave policy for municipal politicians across Nova Scotia.

Megan Hodges, a Kings County councillor, said she found out a few days before she was elected in 2016 that she was pregnant.

"When I told the mayor, he didn't miss a beat. He just said, 'I look forward to have a breastfeeding councillor in chambers,'" said Hodges.

Leave was up for debate

Hodges said for the most part, everyone has been supportive. But she adds a couple of weeks before she gave birth, there was a council debate about giving her leave.

"As great as that was, I don't think it's up to us to debate it," said Hodges.

Kings County voted to give Hodges 12 months' paid leave, which is what municipal employees are given.

Hodges did not take advantage of the decision, opting to continue attending council meetings. She said she was able to do that partly because her husband was able to get paternity leave.

Provincewide policy needed

Now Hodges' colleague on Kings County council, Deputy Mayor Emily Lutz, is pregnant. She's due in March.

Lutz isn't sure how much time she will need to take off, but said the nature of her husband's employment, as a farmer, means he'll have a hard time taking advantage of paternity leave.

Under the current rules, Lutz could have an unexplained absence for three consecutive meetings. After that, council would have to approve every meeting she misses. Lutz says that shouldn't be necessary.

"Is it up to the 10 elected officials in Kings County to put something on paper?" asked Lutz. "Or is this something that really should be provincewide?"

In May 2017, Ontario's Municipal Act was amended to allow municipal politicians to take up to 20 weeks for maternity or paternity leave.

Similar changes are being considered in Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia.

'Times are changing'

Lutz raised the issue in 2016 with a committee that was reviewing Nova Scotia's Municipal Government Act, but it was not included in the most recent round of amendments.

Lutz said she thinks it's time for a new policy here.

"I think it would show that we are open and willing to have young people be involved," said Lutz. "Times are changing. I think the system needs to change to reflect that."

A spokesperson for the Department of Municipal Affairs said the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities plans to reconvene its women in local government committee sometime in the future.

Krista Higdon said maternity leave will be one of the committee's primary topics of discussion and the department will work in partnership with that committee.

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